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# Fashion-forward killer: Villanelle, costuming and queer style in *Killing Eve*

## ABSTRACT

*Costuming within the BBC television drama series Killing Eve (2018–) functions as a spectacular dressing-up box to support the representation of Villanelle (Jodie Comer) as the glamorous globe-trotting assassin. This article will argue that Villanelle's fashion-forward wardrobe offers a multifarious representation of contemporary queer styling. Her costuming is characterized by gender fluidity and a play with the dominant codes and signifiers of lesbian style and identity. Villanelle's looks move beyond the stereotyped constraints of the butch-femme binary to construct a polymorphous representation of femininity with broad cross-over appeal. In offering a striking silhouette that draws attention away from the material body onto costuming, Villanelle's representation highlights the fluidity of gendered and sexual identities. Her costuming may appear to reduce Villanelle to a series of surface appearances, yet these iterations result in a significant queer representation on mainstream contemporary television.*

## KEYWORDS

*Killing Eve*  
Villanelle  
costuming  
fashion  
queer style  
lesbian style  
butch-femme  
television drama

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## INTRODUCTION

The British television drama series *Killing Eve* (2018–) centres upon the seductive, yet brutal, cat-and-mouse relationship between Jodie Comer's glamorous assassin Villanelle and the fashion-blind investigator Eve (played by Sandra Oh). Villanelle is the sociopathic 'child of post-Soviet chaos' (Jennings 2018) and across the three seasons to date, the series turns the spy thriller on its head. Simultaneously beguiling and reprehensible, her representation differs from the female assassins in *La Femme Nikita* (Besson 1990), *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo/Män som Hatar Kvinnor* (Fincher 2011; Oplev 2009) and *Atomic Blonde* (Leitch 2017). Unlike these other lead characters, Nikita, Lisbeth and Lorraine, Villanelle is flirtatious, with a child-like comic playfulness in which her dead-pan jokes, droll comments and facial expressions fracture the tension of the brutal violence here (Whitehead 2019: n.pag.). Not only is Villanelle adorned in a spectacular array of fashion-forward outfits from established and emerging designers, but she is an openly matter-of-fact queer character. Queer, as Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas argue, has 'now permanently shifted into the realm of social and bodily types that do not conform to the model that is "straight", namely heterosexual, conventional and middle class' (2013: 2). Villanelle has sex with men and women, indulges in threesomes with other women and masturbates whilst listening in remotely to Eve having sex (Whitehead 2019; Liao 2018). She conforms to the notion that queer 'sets out to dodge, undermine, parody and ultimately eradicate the hetero-homo binary' (see Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 3). In transgressing heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality, the depiction of Villanelle is a refreshing and compelling characterization with cross-over appeal for a range of viewers.

Through the close textual analysis of examples of Villanelle's costuming and performance in *Killing Eve*, this article examines how her looks reference elements of queer style (Karaminas 2013; Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Wilson 2013). Moving beyond the outdated stereotypes of the 'congenitally unfashionable' lesbian and the butch-femme dynamic (Blackman and Perry 1990: 67; Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 48; Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020), Villanelle's costuming offers a play with sexuality and gender that speaks to the fluidity of contemporary queer identities and style. We will discuss Villanelle's suits and how instances of her looks intersect and diverge from iconic queer representations within popular visual culture. Integral to this examination will be the analysis of how her pockets, together with her fabric and tailoring offer a visual narrative of gyno- and phallic-centric sexual symbolism centred on passion, power and violence. Through costuming, Villanelle signals her sexual assertiveness and willingness to take 'erotic responsibility' (see Karaminas 2013: 195). We will then explore how examples of Villanelle's more

stereotypically femme outfits, combined with Comer's darkly comic and camp performance, construct a disruptive fashion-centric representation of queer femininity dominated by artifice and exaggeration.

As she moves between geographical locations, Villanelle reveals a multiplicity of different looks. From delivery driver to clown, pyjama-clad runaway to hyper-femme, her chameleon-like wardrobe does more than simply support her character construction as an assassin on a mission (see Figures 1–4). *Killing Eve* embodies the tensions between the storytelling role of costume to 'support or transcend' the demands of the narrative, its capacity to act as spectacle, and the cross-media promotion and commodification of fashion (Street 2001: 4; Bruzzi 1997; Gilligan 2017; Church Gibson 2012). Where some have argued that costume's role is to be unobtrusive and subservient to the demands of character and the narrative (Gaines 1990; Stutesman 2011; Nadoolman Landis 2012), *Killing Eve* offers a disruption to this notion. Villanelle's costuming acts (to borrow from Stella Bruzzi in a different context) as a series of 'spectacular interventions', which 'interfere with the scenes in which they appear and impose themselves onto the character they adorn' (1997: xv). Through pattern, fabric and colour, garments draw attention to themselves as Villanelle moves through the landscape. The publicity shots of Villanelle adorned in a voluminous pink Molly Goddard dress with chunky Balenciaga boots, or the long, black chiffon Alexander McQueen gown undeniably offer spectacular fashion moments (see Figures 5–6). Recirculated online on social media, blogs and articles, such on-screen looks blur with the photoshoots of Comer by Steven Meisel in British *Vogue* (Hattersley 2020) and Mariana Maltoni in *Elle* (UK edition, Nathanson 2019).



Figures 1–4: Villanelle's chameleon-like wardrobe in *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.





Figures 5 and 6: Villanelle dressed in Alexander McQueen (left) and Molly Goddard (right), *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.

Tall, lean and youthful, Comer functions as performer-model-celebrity as she effortlessly moves from TV drama to fashion editorial, in accordance with the trends and tensions within contemporary visual culture (see Church Gibson 2012). Despite the spectacle of costuming, there is a conspicuous absence of a verbalized fashion discourse within the series; instead, such ‘written clothing’ appears together with ‘image-clothing’ (to borrow from Barthes 1967/1990), in the copy of cross-media promotional editorials and user-generated content on blogs and social media platforms. Although many of the garments Villanelle wears are sourced designer fashion items from established and emerging brands, when they appear on-screen it is important to remember they are in fact costumes (also see Wolthuis forthcoming 2021: 10). The work of *Killing Eve*’s costume designers Phoebe De Gaye, Charlotte Mitchell, and Sam Perry (for Seasons 1, 2 and 3, respectively) creates a visual narrative that supports characterization and the technical and physical demands of performance and production (see Stutesman 2011). Seemingly mismatched garments that should not go together create a tension that is intrusive and theatrical and also at times is humorous and tongue-in-cheek. There is not a stable image that ‘is’ Villanelle, rather, she exists as surface appearances, highlighting her fluidity on and beyond the screen.

## QUEER STYLE

Through the close analysis of dress, we are able to examine and evaluate the means by which identities are culturally constructed, manifested and disrupted within and beyond popular culture (Reilly and Barry 2020). Dress, body, movement and gesture can be self-consciously utilized both ‘to transgress gender ideals’ and ‘reject fixed notions of sexual desire’ (Karaminas 2013: 194). Where gay men’s style has been the subject of academic attention (Cole 2015, 2013, 2000; Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Barry and Martin 2016; Breward 2013), lesbian and bisexual histories have been comparatively ‘marginalised and

persecuted by mainstream culture' (Karaminas 2013: 195). Clothing plays a central role in the material construction of queer identities, but historically, as Elizabeth Wilson argues, the popular idea of the lesbian – when she did appear – was 'that of a woman with no style' (2013: 167; Karaminas 2013). Stereotypically characterized as mannish, unnatural and ugly, cultural prejudices of lesbian style have pervaded their representation within popular culture (Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020; Geczy and Karaminas 2013).

Well-dressed lesbians permeate historical accounts and fictional representations, offering a diverse, if under-explored taxonomy of lesbian style (Karaminas 2013; Wilson 2013; Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020; Blackman and Perry 1990). Not only does lesbian style signal a rejection of the heteropatriarchy, it also creates visibility and a sense of belonging (Blackman and Perry 1990). The pervasive 'lesbian aesthetic' of a butch, or distinctly masculine gender expression, as Audrey Gunn et al. argue, has been an appearance norm that queer women 'report feeling pressured to adhere to for their sexual identity to be accepted as valid' (2021: 1). Not confined to stereotypes of the gruff mannish lesbian, queer style extends to those whose looks are daring and 'aesthetically exciting' and speak of lesbian (and bi) sexuality through sophistication and glamour (Wilson 2013: 180). Within both LGBTQ+ communities and academia, 'femme' identities are stereotypically seen to only exist 'in relation to butch identity' and are frequently assumed be less 'authentic' than those who present as butch (Gunn et al. 2021: 2). Feminine lesbian and bisexual women often feel ostracized and are at times are subject to expulsion from queer women's spaces. By not conforming to the masculine lesbian aesthetic, a tension is created between perceived notions of authentic and inauthentic gender and sexual expression (Gunn et al. 2021; Daly et al. 2018). Fluidity permeates contemporary queer style identities through the blurring of sexual and gender binaries. Thus, rather than being constrained to the binary polarizations of butch-femme and heterosexual-homosexual identities, it is imperative that queer women's style is read and accepted in terms of a diversity of codes and signifiers (Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Karaminas 2013; Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020).

In representing queer identities as fluid and multiple, the costuming of Villanelle articulates broader social meanings. Whilst media representations do not fully reflect the complexities and diversity of lived queer experiences, they do offer a space by which meaning and knowledge 'is constructed, circulated and contested' (Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020: 160; Hall 2013, 1997). In her examination of 'simplicity and complexity' in the costuming of *Killing Eve*, Josette Wolthuis argues that Villanelle offers a 'relatively unproblematic' representation of fluid or bisexuality, rather than representing the 'overt or stereotypical traits of lesbian sexuality' (forthcoming 2021: 5). Although LGBTQ+ representation is not Wolthuis' primary focus, she acknowledges that the fluidity of sexuality enables the complexities of costuming lesbian identity to be simplified. Through a combination of androgynous and traditionally feminine costuming, the complexities and contradictions of the dominant stereotype of butch lesbian representation are seemingly bypassed in the series. Following Wolthuis' propositions, there is scope to more closely examine the representation of Villanelle's costuming through a queer lens and discuss how her costuming signals the power and sexual confidence that clothing affords her. Lesbianism offers the potential to combine the celebration of femininity and womanliness, together with the assertion of the independence, power and authority historically and stereotypically associated with

the masculine (Wilson 2013: 174). In turn, Villanelle's stylish costuming fuses elements of the masculine and feminine, the functional and the spectacular to construct a contemporary queer style that speaks to the plurality of queer dress. Rather than being constrained by allegiance to outmoded stereotypes or marginalized by 'femmephobia' (see Gunn et al. 2021), she offers a fashionable image dominated by flux.

### SUITED STYLE

Villanelle's two- and three-piece suits offer a notable play with the codes and signifiers of queer style. The popularizing of mannish suits by queer icons including (but by no means limited to) Radcliffe Hall, Marlene Dietrich, k.d. lang, Madonna in the 'Girlie Show' and Lady Gaga as Jo Calderone (Wilson 2013; Karaminas 2013) offer the potential to transgress the expectations of gender and sexual identities. Through clothing, Villanelle is granted agency to magnify her personality, her stylishness becoming a marker of her power. Across the three seasons (to date) of *Killing Eve*, Villanelle showcases a diverse range of styles, from the baggy to the cinched, the pinstriped to the flamboyantly patterned (see Figures 7–10). In the case of Marlene Dietrich's wardrobe in Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) and Tay Garnett's *Seven Sinners* (1940) the wearing of suits could be understood as having appropriated sites of patriarchal phallic power and privilege, connoting military might or the seductive charm of the upper-class Lothario. As Wilson argues, the thrill of Dietrich in *Morocco* is 'in the ambiguity, for this sort of travesty always suggests something beyond mere male and female' (2013: 179; Studlar 1990). Rather than reinforcing the obvious, the smudging of gender appeals to the imagination and becomes more seductive, erotic and playful (Wilson 2013; Bruzzi 1997).

The eroticism of androgyny that permeates the representation of Dietrich, or Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian 1933) is characterized by a combination of glamour, clean lines and tailoring (Gundle 2008; Bruzzi 1997; Gaines 1989; Landy and Villarejo 1995). Through clothing and performance, Dietrich constructed herself as the 'point of multiple erotic identification' (Bruzzi 1997: 175), and this is exemplified by Villanelle's wedding outfit at the start of Season Three (see Figure 10). Her look is reminiscent of Yves Saint Laurent's (YSL) 1966 *Le Smoking* and in particular Helmut Newton's iconic



Figures 7–9: Villanelle's suited style in *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.





Figure 10: Villanelle's wedding suit, *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK.  
© BBC America.

1975 photographs for French *Vogue*. Inspired by the 'mannish costumes' of iconic stars such as Dietrich and Garbo, Saint Laurent's reworking of the tux constructs a strong and determined image (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 35; Gundle 2008; Bruzzi 1997), but it is one that is imbued with an intense eroticism. Villanelle's *Commes des Garçon* jacket is cut longer – whilst repeatedly referred to in the journalistic discourses as a tuxedo, it is a morning coat. Worn as men's lounge suits for leisure, the morning coat with its elongated tails is now more commonly reserved for formal occasions such as weddings. The flowing jacket skims the body and contrasts mannish tailoring with soft, translucent fabrics that draw attention to the body beneath, through the bustier blouse. To Saint Laurent, 'a woman was no less feminine in a pair

of trousers than she was in a skirt', but as Bruzzi argues, in order to flaunt the eroticism of androgyny he 'accentuated the femininity of these masculine looks, by adding details that were quintessentially feminine' (1997: 178). Where for Le Smoking Saint Laurent juxtaposed a soft silk pussy bow blouse, Villanelle's is worn with a tulle mesh Simone Rocha top which enables eroticism – like the Le Smoking outfit – to be 'enacted on the surfaces' of the body (see Bruzzi 1997: 178). At first glance, the top appears as a mesh revealing an elaborate, yet delicate, bra, but in fact the bustier is built into the top as a hard surface between fabric and flesh. Coupled with the casting of the tall, slender, blonde Comer, her performance of eroticized and at times excessive femininity can be seen to adhere to the trope of the 'lipstick lesbian' (Wolthuis forthcoming 2021; Karaminas 2013).

Glamorous, ambitious and affluent, the lipstick lesbian, as seen in the 1990s and on the showtime series *The L Word* (2004–09), marks a shift from the anti-consumption stereotypes towards a post-feminist representation with broad mainstream appeal (Karaminas 2013; Heller 2013). Adorned in her striking, colourfully patterned Dries van Noten suit (see Figure 11), Villanelle confidently struts in flâneur-like mode through the Berlin club scene. Like the leisured connoisseurs before her (see Breward 1999: 153), Villanelle is less a lipstick lesbian and more a well-dressed bohemian, at home in the crowd, surveying the richness of the spectacle before her and revelling in her to-be-looked-at-ness. Whilst her bold, upright stance carries elements of an unmistakable butch symbolism, the tension that is created by the bottom button of the jacket being done up serves to accentuate the waist and the line of the hip providing a more feminized look, a queering of the stereotype. Villanelle's suit offers a chameleon-like camouflage enabling her to move through the city streets with ease. Through the deep blues she merges into the fabric of the city, but as the light changes the red draws attention to her form within the space. This (in)visibility echoes her (anti)fashion status, with Dries van Noten and Belgian fashion since the late 1980s being 'synonymous with the deconstructionist avant-garde styles' of the Antwerp 6 (Bronseleer 2010: n.pag.). As Nicola Brajato and Alexander Dhosest (2020) suggest, in favouring a personal/individual perspective contemporary Belgian avant-garde fashion challenges strictly gendered aesthetics offering a site of creative resistance. Villanelle embodies the international individualism of the Antwerp style, questioning, engaging and rebelling against dominant notions of style and identity through her colourful disruption.

Colour, pattern and contrasting textures are integral to the ways Villanelle's suits disrupt expectations (see Figures 12–13). Angular, pointy and poised or jacket unbuttoned, hands thrust in pockets, she offers a contemporary, fashion-forward appropriation of queer mannish attire. Conversely, lesbian bar culture from the 1940s to the early 1960s saw the rise of a new generation of butches, whose working-class identities were often (through necessity of discrimination) characterized by a tough and aggressive image dominated by tailored suits, or jeans and boots with short hair (Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Wilson 2013). These attitudes were perhaps best captured in cinema by Robert Aldrich's 1968 lesbian classic *The Killing of Sister George*. With scenes shot on location in London's Gateways nightclub, one of the few places in the United Kingdom where lesbians could meet openly during the 40s, 50s and 60s, featuring regular club-goers, the disapproved 'butch/femme' binary demonstrated by Mercy Croft's (Coral Brown) attitude towards June 'George' Buckridge (Beryl Reid) and Alice 'Childie'



*Figure 11: Villanelle confidently struts through the Berlin club scene, Killing Eve, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.*

McNaught (Susannah York). In rejecting modes of femininity constructed by the heteropatriarchy, the adoption of masculine dress signifies a rejection of male domination and authority, functioning as a ‘demand for the right to power and authority’ (Wilson 2013: 173; Blackman and Perry 1990). Whilst trouser-wearing women are largely no longer taboo in public situations (Wilson 2013), Villanelle’s suited swagger as she walks through the European city streets speaks of a queer performance of tough, self-assured confidence that is also ‘erotically enticing’ (see Kennedy and Davis 1993: 159; Geczy and Karaminas 2013).





Figures 12 and 13: *Queering suiting in Killing Eve, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK.* © BBC America.

### POCKETS AND POWER

Villanelle's queer styling is constructed through a combination of what, how and where her outfits are worn. Unlike her lesbian predecessors, Villanelle's looks are not confined to private moments in darkened clubs, salons or at-home rent parties (see Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Wilson 2013). She owns the spaces that she occupies. She is able to move in the public domain, confidently walking the streets alone with her hands-in-pockets stance. Stereotypically, the bold trouser pocket stance draws attention to the groin. It constructs and asserts a mythic potent phallic power, as can be seen in the cinematic representations of masculinity in the James Bond franchise and also in films such as *The Great Gatsby* (Luhrmann 2013; Clayton 1974) and *Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese 2013). The pocket, as a utilitarian characteristic of menswear, is something often absent, or rendered so perfunctory to be useless, in much womenswear. The volume and space afforded by a large pocket in menswear enables a performance dominated by swagger, a confidence and ease centring on the intersection of body and clothes. Tailoring and pockets offer both phallic and gyno-centric symbolism which communicate an eroticized visual discourse. Throughout the series (see Figures 14–17), we see instances of Villanelle not only with her hands in her pockets, but also standing with shoulders back, plunging her hands into the deep folds of fabric. She becomes the phallic woman, her hands acting as a lesbian phallus, or a fantasy penis (see Gardiner 2012; Butler 1993). Detached from the male body, the phallus/penis is decentred as the primary locus of erotic signification, as pleasure and



Figures 14–17: Villanelle's bold trouser pocket stance, *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.

power are displaced onto the hands. Like the 'sexually voracious and excessive' *lionne*, who 'dipped into the pool of male activity' (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 26), Villanelle's assertiveness is also attractive.

If one returns to Sue Harper's seminal work on the costuming of Gainsborough melodramas of the 1940s and 50s, the pocket can be read as a complex visual signifier. Within these feminine narratives, spectacular aspects of *mise en scène* are foregrounded, to enable a focus upon feelings and passion (1987: 179–80; Cook 1996). Concealed fastenings, and a plethora of pleats and folds, hidden centres and vortexes offer stylized genital symbolism (Harper 1987: 182–4). In *Killing Eve*, the confident placement, thrusting hand and lingering fingers which are enveloped by the opening of the pocket offer potent sexual cues. Historically, as Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux (2019) discuss, the women's pocket as a tie-on garment gave it a

proximity to the skin and pelvis so furthering its sexual overtones. The opening of the pocket is both hidden and suggestively revealed, becoming strongly evocative of female genitalia. Underneath the vulval layers of fabric, the body resides and the pocket becomes a liminal space on the threshold of pleasure. For *Killing Eve* costume designer Charlotte Mitchell, the intersection between pockets and performance is integral to whether costuming and character are 'really going to work, really feel real' (Breen Burns 2019: n.pag.). To Mitchell, when Comer puts her hands in her pockets, 'you can see, she sort of has that strut and looks great, she's claiming it' (Breen Burns 2019: n.pag.). Whilst this notion of ownership, of the performer becoming a character through costuming, adheres to dominant discourse of screen costuming's storytelling and subservient role, one can also argue the use of pockets in this context is disruptive and spectacular. After all, in the context of contemporary womenswear the frequent absence of pockets remains both personal and political, creating a distinct gendered difference in garments and the necessity to invest in further commodified accessories.

Where the pocket and layers and folds of the suit can be seen to create an intimate vulval symbolism, the play with sexual codes and power within Villanelle's costuming is further represented through the oversized SS2019 Hussain Chalayan suit (Series 3/Episode 3). Where several of Villanelle's other suits hug and highlight her silhouette, this suit swamps her frame. Despite the huge shoulder pads, in contrast to a 1980s femme power-suit worn with heels and huge lacquered hair, Villanelle's hair is swept back, the trousers baggy and the boots sensible. She seemingly becomes the embodiment of the well-dressed butch lesbian clone (see Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 35). Yet the costuming and performance also carry echoes of the intersections between queer style, BDSM and power dressing. In many ways the brutal cat-and-mouse games between Villanelle and Eve offer a representation of a sadomasochistic power play. Costuming and props combine with the theatre of violence, trust and negotiation (Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Steele 1996). The publicity shots for Season Three even featured Villanelle adorned in a body hugging, red leather catsuit, evoking the image of the dominatrix. Power and control permeate the narrative as they explore and push the boundaries of how much pain they can tolerate. As Geczy and Karaminas discuss, BDSM style in the 1980s evolved in parallel with 'power dressing'. Aggressive, upward mobility, greed and domination became represented through 'taut angularity' and 'exaggerated shoulders' (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 105). As Villanelle shops in London for perfume before confronting Eve, she declares that she wants to smell powerful, like a Roman Centurion who has become an Emperor and 'is now powerful beyond measure'. As Villanelle holds Eve down on the seat of the bus, Villanelle asks 'What do I smell of?' As she bears down on Eve, we can appreciate the phallic power of the shoulder of Villanelle's suit (see Figure 18). Foregrounded in this display of brute force, with the angle of the bungee detailing reminiscent of a knife being held to the throat, the costuming is both connected to and overwhelms the body. Here we find echoes of both the sadomasochistic and butch-femme dynamic, but also of something altogether more sinister, that of patriarchal oppression. Villanelle's costuming is intrusive, brutal and dominating, speaking for the complexities of gendered power, violence and passion. One must remember that such references and analysis of phallic (and gyno-centric) symbolism are in respect to visual signifiers and not the reality of the materiality or lived experience of the body, identities or sexuality. As Richard Dyer argues in *The*





Figure 18: *Villanelle bears down on Eve*, *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.

*Matter of Images*, there is a ‘discrepancy between symbols and what penises are actually like’ (2002: 90). The visual symbolism of potent phallic power is not the same as the fragile, delicate penis that can get caught in a trouser zip. The suit, as Anne Hollander discusses, enables the material body to be recut into an idealized image, where the nude is ‘even more natural when dressed’ (1994: 90). Villanelle appropriates menswear as a new skin to recast herself as seemingly ever more powerful, phallic and sexually assertive. Through its volume, it creates a void between the materiality of the flesh and the structural and sculptural fabric form. Such sartorial spaces reconfigure, reconstruct and expand the frame of the body to create a hard, powerful suit of armour that acts as sartorial architecture (see Bruno 2014; Quinn 2003).

### ARTIFICE AND EXAGGERATION

Soft fabrics, leather and fur (see Figures 19–21) offer the capacity to reconfigure the body through artifice and exaggeration. Villanelle’s ever-shifting



Figures 19–21: Villanelle's costuming is characterised by artifice and exaggeration, *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.

queer aesthetic embraces and amplifies the stereotypical femme to embrace camp. Standing in the Place Vendôme in Paris, adorned in billowing pink tulle Molly Goddard dress and cutaway black Balenciaga boots, Villanelle offers 'statement-making style' (Yotka 2018: n.pag.). The look, as costume designer Phoebe de Gaye argues, offers a 'subversive streak' in which Villanelle both dresses and acts like a 'mad little girl' through colour and the 'mixture of the extremely feminine, almost to the slightly perverse point, with those boots, which are a good mix' (de Gaye in Yotka 2018: n.pag.). Engulfed by the swathes of tulle against the Parisian landscape, the dress initially appears to offer an excess of glamour. In contrast to Grace Kelly's tulle-laden perfection in *Rear Window* where, as Bruzzi argues, Lisa 'is perfect to a fault, she is too beautiful' (1997: 18), the calf-length cut, ruching and puffed sleeves swamp rather than skim Villanelle's body. When seated at her therapy session, Villanelle's dress echoes the iconic shots of Carrie in *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), adorned in her grey Atelier Versace gown (Season 6).

For Villanelle, like Carrie (see Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2004, Radner 2010, Warner 2014), the dress connotes her emotional vulnerability, the oversized look reducing the stature of her frame to child-like proportions (see Figures 22 and 23). The pink dress dominates Villanelle's frame, her body vanishing beneath its layers. In contrast to the strident confidence of her hands-in-pockets stance when adorned in a suit, the dress wears Villanelle. The oversized garment both enables a freedom and fluidity of movement, as with reform dress (see Casto 2009); the body is not confined and constricted and thus Villanelle is once again granted agency and power. Oversized garments contrast with the too-smallness (see Wright 1992) of her stolen comic book pyjamas, or the elongated dramatic silhouette of the Alexander McQueen dress coupled with a tulle fascinator. From the polka dot blouse to a brashly patterned suit, the clown costume to the pig mask, exaggeration, playfulness and artifice pervade Villanelle's costuming (see



Figures 24 and 25). Her leather jackets offer exaggerated puffed shoulders and ruffled necklines, which reframe the boundaries of the body. Patterns and bold colours increasingly dominate her wardrobe, drawing attention to the constant spectacular changes in appearance and very codes of femininity being nothing more than layers of surface appearances. Garments through their excess become not just fashion moments, but witty, ironic plays with gender and sexuality.

Such disruptive sartorial strategies recur throughout the series (and are too numerous to explore here), but can also be seen in the green shearling Charlotte Knowles jacket that Villanelle wears in Season 3/Episode 7 (see Figure 26). The Hulk green jacket, as season three's costume designer Sam



Figures 22–23: Villanelle at her therapy session (top), *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America. Carrie awaiting Petrovsky in *Sex in the City* (bottom), Seasons 1–6, 1998–2004, USA. HBO.



Perry discusses, is ‘unhinged and crazy’ and supports the representation of Villanelle as ‘an unbalanced, obsessive and extravagant monster’ (Cary 2020: n.pag.). This use of costuming not only adheres to the dominant discourses of costume design’s storytelling role, but its use of spectacle can also be read in terms of an appropriation of the artifice of camp as a means to further examine the ways in which Villanelle queers costuming.

As Susan Sontag declared in her seminal article, ‘the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration’ (1964: 1; Bolton 2019), a statement that could so easily have been made about the subject under discussion here. The frivolous, sensual and copious stylization leads to an aesthetic focus upon the details of surface and style rather than substance and content (see Sontag 1964: 4–6). Such elements can be read as integral to queer style. Geczy and Karaminas argue that queer is:

[t]hat state of being and its visible incarnations that have embraced affection and false creations as ends in themselves, in effect abjuring the distinction between thing and appearance, and embracing artifice, pretence and exaggeration over ‘conformity’ to an imaginary truth.

(2013: 1–2)

From the drama of the black Alexander McQueen dress, to the pink tutu worn with the dirndl and pig mask, Villanelle’s outfits are outlandish, opulent and at times extraordinary. She embodies the notion of ‘being-as-playing-a-role’: for her, every mission is an opportunity to treat life as theatre through impersonation (see Sontag 1964: 9–10). Carnival, transgression, the unstable and the bizarre become integral to Villanelle’s queer style, as each look reveals a plurality of appearances which resist conformity to heterosexual normativity (see Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 4–5). When coupled with Comer’s playful and tongue-in-cheek performance Villanelle is constructed as a camp killer. Camp through its winking, yet discerning, eye, lends itself, as Fabio Cleto argues, not only to lists of its qualities, characteristics and instances, but also highlights



Figures 24–25: Artifice, playfulness and camp in *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.



Figure 26: Villanelle in a Charlotte Knowles jacket, *Killing Eve*, Seasons 1–3, 2018–20, UK. © BBC America.

its very intangible and shifting existence as sign, theory and field of reference (2019: 15). Villanelle's visible disgust for instance, as she places her bare feet into the embellished (pseudo) crocs in the hospital, calls into question the playful trolling of fashionistas by Christopher Kane (SS2017) and Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga (SS18). Villanelle may love luxury fashion, but a bejewelled croc (Minton 2018; Logan 2017; Wynne 2016) is perhaps a camp step too far.

As we consider a notion of queer camp, we should not forget that until recently women have frequently been excluded from the discourses on camp. As Pamela Robertson has argued, 'most debates on camp equate it with gay male taste' (1993: 156). Furthermore, Sontag's camp 'offended as much as it excited' (Cleto 2019: 33). Yet, if as Chuck Kleinhans explains:

[t]o some extent, camp originates in a gay male perception that gender is, if not quite arbitrary, certainly not biologically determined or natural, but rather that gender is socially constructed, artificial, and performed (and thus open to being consciously deformed).

(1994: 162)

Thus, Villanelle's performance can be read as fake and contrived, appropriating a terrain long deemed the privilege of gay male culture. Villanelle appropriates elements of lesbian camp built typically around butch/femme binaries and a play with heterosexual codes through masquerade (see Nielsen 2016; Hemmings 2007). Villanelle can be appreciated as 'embodied excess and available melodrama', traits that serve to mimic and parody essentialized gender identities (Nielsen 2016: 116). This excess of 'genderedness' – to borrow from Annamari Vänskä (2007) in a different context – can also be appreciated in both the extravagant uber-femme and the parodic performance of the heterosexual male encapsulated all in one character. If confined to a stable representation as

a lesbian femme, Villanelle would not trouble the gender dynamic. It is rather in the multiplicity of images and her gender fluidity that she offers a representation of queer camp. Her costuming coupled with performance creates an artificial physicality rooted in swagger and cockiness, which draws from a strong and developed sense of the multiplicity of lesbian identities (Clements 2018: n.pag.). Gestures, mannerisms and attitude are magnified (see Jones 2019: n.pag.). Her command of public spaces through movement, gesture and violence makes her physical prowess and level of fitness are clear for all to appreciate. Villanelle is not demure – she takes up space with her gestures and she frequently breaks the fourth wall with her droll facial expressions.

## CONCLUSION

As Wilson argues, in a (British) context where queer culture is both increasingly visible and accepted, one might ask ‘just how transgressive it is to be queer’ (2013: 188). Queer identities in a culture of seemingly endless consumption and individualism become more of a ‘lifestyle choice than a permanently fixed orientation’ (Wilson 2013: 189). The glamorous, well-dressed and visible lesbian no longer has a need to adhere to a specific, monolithic lesbian style (Wilson 2013: 189). The intersection of gender and sexual aesthetics is a site of complexity and fluidity, not simply confined to the polarization of binaries. Whilst for some, androgynous (or non-gender binary) elements of a lesbian aesthetic can be seen to mark a move towards masculinity as a more ‘neutral zone’ and away from femininity (Gunn et al. 2021: 10), Villanelle’s representation is characterized by a constant shift and play across a spectrum of gendered identities. She does not simply adopt either butch, femme or androgynous aesthetics, she moves between, combining and disrupting categorizations through revealing a diversity of looks. In treating clothing as a dressing-up-box, she does not conform to a singular stereotype of the lesbian aesthetic, nor become pigeon-holed as (in)authentic. Her fluid construction of identity is not only marked by the garments she wears, but also by how she wears them. Frequently represented as full of swagger-laden confidence, she draws attention to herself and her clothes through movement and gestures.

Villanelle’s costuming and character reflect a wide range of identities that resist labelling and fixedness. When analysing screen costuming one is always at risk of conflating costume and fashion and becoming preoccupied with the designer garments which appear on-screen. Showy, frilly and colourful outfits by designers such as Alexander McQueen, Chloe, Loewe, Lanvin, Gucci, Balenciaga and Dries Van Noten jostle for attention on-screen with garments and accessories by Halpern, Chalayan, Ann Demeulemeester, Burberry, The Vampire’s Wife, Petar Petrov, Charlotte Knowles, and of course ‘that’ pink Molly Goddard dress (Blair 2020; Saraiya 2018). Although Villanelle is styled in a combination of vintage and contemporary creations by established and emerging fashion designers, these looks are coupled with bespoke costume designs. Villanelle shops and tries garments on, but she does not name drop. They are not name checked within the dialogue, nor do logos gratuitously appear as product placement. Yet those with the cultural capital of the fashion industry, aware of the intricacies of cut, style and palette of specific brands and their collections may recognize garments previously seen on the catwalk. It is only when the garments are promoted and consumed in the cross-media discourses that screen costuming returns to its status as fashion. In turn, garments are enthusiastically name checked, visuals and links provided in

editorials, blogs and online promotions as her looks are promoted to a diverse audience.

In appropriating multifarious elements of queer style, Villanelle's costuming is marked by the absence of overt imagery, slogans and rainbow colours that frequently signify LGBTQ+ Pride. Rather, she is adorned in garments imbued with specific coding that could be perceived and understood by the LGBTQ+ community and their allies (see Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Cole 2000), whilst not drawing attention to themselves and alienating other audiences with overt, stereotypically queer aesthetics. Villanelle's costuming may hint at BDSM fantasies, but they are diffused and thus rendered fashionable and safe. With each new look, Villanelle promises that she can be everywhere – she can be every lesbian. In offering numerous points of identification and aspiration for a broad spectrum of viewers, her costuming constructs a non-conformist, fashion-forward killer who presents no consistent style and no fixed look. Yet it is important to note that Villanelle in many ways embodies the notion that 'the best way to be lesbian was to be rich, white, and fashionably dressed' (Reddy-Best and Baker Jones 2020: 171). Whilst not a stereotypical 'lipstick lesbian', whether adorned in suits, or flowing dresses, Villanelle's tall, lean, youthful body undoubtably serves to construct her as a 'sexy' lesbian. She conforms to the current – and highly problematic – dictates of fashion, being well-dressed, slim, young, solvent, able-bodied and White.

Diverse representations of intersectional queer identities are still conspicuous by their absence in mainstream media. Through her conformity to hegemonic appearance ideals, Villanelle is aspirational, fashionable and thus rendered acceptable for mainstream British TV. Whilst representations in popular culture of queer identities may appear to be moving from the margins to the mainstream, we must also be mindful that the lived experiences of being queer for many in the United Kingdom and beyond are far removed from acceptance and inclusion. As the child of post-Soviet chaos, Villanelle as a fictional character is granted fluidity and freedom, but for many queer individuals living in contemporary Russia, the reality is currently very different (Roberts 2019, 2017; Buyantueva 2018). Only when lived experiences echo the utopian, fashionable ideals represented in popular culture may such an array of sartorial signs be truly redundant.

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